Cartoon from *The Messenger*, 2 (August 1919):4

WHEN THEY GET TOGETHER THEY'LL DUMP US OFF !!

WORKERS of the WORLD UNITE !!

You Have Nothing to Lose But Your Chains

Cartoon from *The Messenger*, August 1919

By William Sraile
City University of New York

BEN FLETCHER, I.W.W. ORGANIZER

The dawn of the Twentieth Century revealed that the vast majority of American workers were not represented by an effective union. The American Federation of Labor under the leadership of Samuel Gompers spoke for skilled workers. Afro-Americans and unskilled European immigrants were victimized by disunity and inarticulate voices in the labor arena. In September 1904 six labor leaders gathered together and formed a nucleus of what later became the Industrial Workers of the World. They were Isaac Cowen, the American representative of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers of Great Britain; W. L. Hall and George Estes, general secretary-treasurer and president, respectively of the United Brotherhood of Railway Employees; Clarence Smith, general secretary-treasurer of the American Labor Union; Thomas J. Hagerty, editor of the A.L.U.'s *Voice of Labor*; and William E. Trautmann, editor of *Brauer Zeitung*, organ of the United Brewery Workers of America.[1]

Out of this meeting came an invitation to about thirty others to meet in Chicago on 2 January 1905. The labor activists in the Windy City discussed the ways and means of uniting the workers to accept "correct revolutionary principles." A manifesto was issued for a summer conference. From 27 June to 8 July eighty-six delegates, representing approximately 90,000 workers, met in Chicago and heard Trautmann, Hagerty, William D. Haywood and others denounce the wage system as a "parasitic system" that granted the wives of employers "silks and satins" while workers' wives wore calico.[2]

1. Paul F. Brissenden, *The I.W.W.: A Study of American Syndicalism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1920), pp. 37-50, 58, 68; Vincent St. John, *The I.W.W. & Its History, Structure & Methods*, (Chicago: IWW Publishing Bureau, 1917), p. 2.

2. St. John, *The I.W.W.*, pp. 3, 10; *Proceedings of the Industrial Workers of the World Assembled in Chicago, June 27 - July 8, 1905*, (New York: Labor News Company, 1905), pp. 82, 85, 112-118, 568, 608-615, 637, 961; Justus Ebert, *The I.W.W. in Theory & Practice*, (Chicago: Industrial Workers of the World, 1920), pp. 69, 71.

From its origin in 1905 to its virtual demise in the early twenties, the IWW was dedicated to the proposition that all workers regardless of race, color, creed, national origin, sex, and skills should be organized into the One Big Union. The IWW or "Wobblies," was committed to achieving a new society where racism and class distinctions would eventually wither under the heat of workers' solidarity. At a time when black Americans were daily victimized by racial exclusion from most of AFL locals, Jim Crow legislation, political disfranchisement, racial stereotyping, and lynch mobs, perhaps it was the union's concern for improving race relations that attracted black men like Benjamin Harrison Fletcher (1890-1949) to its banners.

Fletcher was born in Philadelphia on 14 April 1890. Little is known about his life prior to 1910. Whether he attended college or not is unclear. The Philadelphia *Tribune* reporter in his obituary that he attended both Wilberforce and Virginia Union Universities, but neither institution has any record of his attendance.[1]

Ben Fletcher became associated with the IWW in 1911 as a longshoreman who was earning sixteen dollars weekly prior to becoming a labor organizer in 1913. The Wobblies did not tolerate racial discrimination and that factor plus Fletcher's above average intelligence resulted in him becoming correspondence secretary of Local No. 57 in Philadelphia. In August 1912 Fletcher informed *Solidarity* that Local No. 57 had passed a motion calling on the delegates at the forthcoming Seventh Annual Convention of the IWW to "devise ways and means of furnishing all members . . . with the Industrial Worker and Solidarity . . . free of charge." In a separate and personal message, he stated that a properly established press would make the IWW "the most potent power of the age."[2]

In 1912 Fletcher began to organize for the IWW along the eastern seaboard. During the spring and summer Fletcher and other Philadelphia dockworkers who had been out of the labor movement since 1898 struck for better wages and eventually voted to be affiliated with the IWW as Local No. 8. Since 2,200 of the 1,200 dockworkers were black, Fletcher's powerful voice and high intelligence became weapons in articulating the concept of One Big Union to the poorly educated and often illiterate dock worker. In July Fletcher went to

1. *Philadelphia Tribune*, 18 July 1925, p. 2; *Industrial Worker*, 22 July 1949, p. 4; T. N. Preston, Registrar, Virginia Union University to author, 28 April 1975; Thomas H. Hawkins, Registrar, Central State University (received copies of Wilberforce to author, 26 June 1975.

2. *Industrial Worker*, 28 September 1912, p. 3; *Solidarity*, 10 August 1912, p. 2; *New York Call* (Magazine section), 5 September 1920, p. 7.

Baltimore to organize the black dockworkers there to support the longshoremen's strike in Philadelphia. Fletcher believed that effective organizing would win converts in Baltimore since the American Federation of Labor were "labor fakirs" and the IWW was "the labor movement." "All else," Fletcher reported, "was fake and fraud."[5]

Organizing workers in the early Twentieth Century was often a difficult and dangerous job, as the organizer had to contend with employers' "private armies," scabs, and informers. Emil John Lever, a white organizer, first met Fletcher on the docks of Philadelphia and was impressed with his skills and character. In 1960 Lever told Herbert Hill of the NAACP, "Ben Fletcher, I always thought, was one of the best organizers I knew." Lever admired Fletcher's ability to organize illiterate blacks from the South who were not amenable to trade union organizations, but who made up about sixty percent of Philadelphia dockworkers. Equally remarkable to Lever was Ben's courage. "You must bear in mind," Lever told Hill, "that there was nothing but the mounted police along the Philadelphia waterfront with their clubs and guns, and it was murder to organize whites, let alone Negroes."[6] Fletcher discovered on at least one occasion that organized workers without good leaders often became unorganized. In 1916 the general office of the IWW in Chicago sent him back to Baltimore to repeat his earlier success.[7]

Neither Fletcher nor the IWW left any records on the ways in which he organized. Undoubtedly he informed the men of the necessity of workers' solidarity as a weapon to prevent employers from raising the race issue. Perhaps Fletcher told the longshoremen that the AFL, with its predominantly segregated locals was not to be trusted. At least once he resorted to an unorthodox approach in an attempt to organize workers. During the mass IWW trial of 1918, the prosecution read a portion of one of Fletcher's letters describing a 1914 incident in an unidentified city. Fletcher allegedly wrote, "I did my part together with a few others by hitting the picket line and scabbing in on the job in order to control it."[8]

5. *Solidarity*, 5 July 1919, p. ; Sterling D. Spero and Vernon L. Harris, *The Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), p. 171.

6. Oral History (Jack Lever), interviewed on 25 May 1960 by Herbert Hill, Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs-IWW, Wayne State University, p. 1. Cited hereafter as IWW Collection, Wayne State.

7. Haywood, et al. vs. U.S. Box 125 1 (Assignment of errors), pp. 599-605, IWW Collection, Wayne State. Spero and Harris, *The Black Worker*, p. 93.

8. Haywood, et al. vs. U.S., p. 599.

In 1917 the IWW sent Fletcher to Boston. As soon as the winter snow began to melt he fanned up Boston by "luring the unorganized dockworkers and even some of the International Longshoremen Association's membership into the IWW. Fletcher wrote to *Solidarity* that the workers were turning against the ILA because they have learned "that a paid up card in the ILA will not permit them to work deepwater ships, even though these ships are being loaded and discharged by other ILA members." Although committed to organizing all dockworkers, Fletcher initially concentrated on recruiting the coastal longshoremen and coal trimmers who were not under ILA control. "The One Big Union," Fletcher reported, "controls forty ships out of this port and are sailing, or twice as many besides. It just requires a little more effort to prove to the other marine transport workers that the IWW is the ship and all else is the deep blue sea."[7]

The Boston workers learned quickly that IWW membership could bring positive results. In May 1917, *Solidarity* noted that the marine transport workers had received a "three" dollar increase and set wage scales while ILA members had no scales and were working for any wage offered.[8] Although Fletcher had met with initial success in Boston, he was "persuaded" to leave New England after a "scrap with Mr. Law." He wrote Bill Haywood in August 1917 explaining that his legal problem left him broke and would Haywood "sight [him] on [to] something." Fletcher asked, "no you know of any point where I can pick up just now? In the middle west? Was thinking that a 'secure' trip through the eastern jurisdiction to Chicago would get some good results. Let me hear from you as quick as possible and oblige."[9]

Fletcher was an active organizer along the eastern seaboard. However, Philadelphia was his home and the city where most of his union activities occurred. In 1910 there were 8,063 dockworkers in Philadelphia of which 1,369 were black.[10] They were unorganized, poorly paid, and often unemployed or underemployed in a highly competitive business that called for physical strength and endurance.

7. Roy Fletcher, "Marine Transport Workers Line Up in Boston," *Solidarity*, 21 April 1917, p. 4.

8. Ibid., 5 May 1917, p. 4.

9. Haywood, et al. vs. U.S. Box 126-A (Assignment of Errors, Second Supplemental Brief and Argument for Defendants in Error), Fletcher to Haywood, 10 August 1917, pp. 180–86., IWW Collection, Wayne State.

10. *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), p. 580.

After overcoming opposition from the American Federation of Labor, the ILA and the local Socialist party in Philadelphia, many longshoremen in the City of Brotherly Love joined the IWW. Many blacks joined because, as one African Methodist Episcopal Church minister noted, 'the IWW at least protects the colored man, which is more than I can say for the laws of this country.' In 1913 the IWW began to achieve substantial gains as the union demanded thirty-five cents an hour instead of accepting the then prevalent rate of twenty to twenty-five cents per hour. By 1916, the IWW controlled all but two of Philadelphia's docks. On 5 April 1916, the dockworkers had received a five cent an hour wage increase without resorting to a strike or without any workers losing time from their jobs. By February 1917, twenty new members a week were being recruited into the Marine Transport Workers Union No. 8. They had won a raise demand for sixty cents an hour "for loading powder, time and half for night work, double time for Sundays, holidays, Saturday afternoon, Saturday night and all meal hours." Speaking in Seattle on 28 January 1917, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn noted how Philadelphia dockworkers were earning four dollars a day whereas in the Pacific Northwest city the ILA after eighteen years' existence managed only to obtain a pay increase to fifty cents an hour and seventy-five cents for overtime.[8]

The Philadelphia workers were willing to strike to benefit other laborers. On 1 February 1917, the Spreckles sugar employees struck. They were joined by firemen, engineers, coopers, oilers, and sack sewers on the 5th and by the marine transport workers on the 9th. As reported in an IWW bulletin, over 5000 sugar workers and 1500 longshoremen and seamen were showing the greatest display of solidarity ever witnessed in the Philadelphia area.[9]

By 1917, nearly sixty percent of the Philadelphia dockworkers were black and for them to display solidarity with others and for unemployed blacks not to walk disproves the generalization that Negroes were always used as strikebreakers. Fletcher and others did a remarkable job in keeping the black workers together. Many had migrated from Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina, and Virginia. Nearly one-third of Philadelphia's 1910 black population of 84,459 had travelled from Virginia. The majority of 512 recent

13 *Solidarity*, 7 April 1916, p. 1; *Industrial Worker*, 3 February 1917, p. 4; *New York Times*, 29 May, 10, 15 June 1913. Philip S. Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker 1619–1973*, (New York, Praeger, 1974), pp. 112, 113.

14. *Industrial Worker*, 20, 27 February 1913, pp. 1, 2; U.S. vs. Haywood, et al., (Bulletin, dated 22 February 1918), p. 120, Box 121, I.W.W. Collection, Wayne State

migrants interviewed in 1919 cited better wages as the reason for coming North. It was indeed amazing that Fletcher was an effective organizer because the alternative to working for ten or fifteen dollars weekly was physical harassment from both private and municipal policemen.[15]

Sticking together not only provided the Philadelphia marine transport workers with more money and better working conditions but also some power. By 1916 the clerk and ship workers had enough strength "to write the menus for all coastwise ships in the IWW hall and to enforce standard quality food" at a time when the chandlers frequently entered into books food items as 'marked unfit for human consumption but ok. for ships' crews."[16]

In the area of race relations, the Wobblies in Philadelphia recognized the need for whites and blacks to stick together. Workers were told by the IWW that disunity would permit employers to exploit them. Forums were established whereby the marine transport workers were educated about the evils of racism. To avoid friction and to create true solidarity, the Philadelphia workers had picnics where both races and their families could become better acquainted. Cartoons in the radical press such as that shown in the accompanying illustration emphasized how employers exploited the race issue.[17]

Unfortunately the IWW had more than their chains to lose as their action among textile workers, longshoremen, similar workers, steel and migrant laborers had reached the stage where not only the AFL despised their significant growth but the federal and various state governments began to suspect that they were receiving German money to carry on their anti-capitalist activities. The Wobblies never formulated a strike policy to interfere with the American war effort but that did not stop federal agents from raiding their offices across the nation on 5 September 1917. In Philadelphia the Marine Transport Workers Unions Nos. 100 and 8 lost all membership records, letters, account books, literature, and bank and check books to federal agents as a result of the government's belief that the IWW wanted "to render the enemy stronger and [America]

15. Jack Gee, "Work Workers, Colored Workers and Organization," *Solidarity*, 28 July 1917, p. 2; Richard R. Wright, Jr., 11th Negro in Pennsylvania [Philadelphia, Conference at Penn, 1911], p. 52; *Second Report of the Secretary of Internal Affairs, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Part III. Fourth Report of the Bureau of Industrial Statistics, 1913* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: William Stanley Ray, State Printer, 1914), pp. 37–38, 42–44.

16. *Industrial Worker*, 22 July 1916, p. 1.

17. *The Messenger*, 2 (August 1920): inside cover; 3 (October 1921): 283.

weak[er]."[48] Within a short period of time 166 Wobblies were indicted, with 101 being brought to trial in Chicago. Later, others were tried in Wichita and Sacramento.

Ben Fletcher was indicted on 20 September 1917 and arrested on 10 February 1918. He was charged with interfering with the Selective Service Act, violating the Espionage Act of 1917, conspiring to strike, violating the constitutional right of employers executing government contracts and using the mails to conspire to defraud employers. After being arrested in Philadelphia, Fletcher was granted bail. According to Roy C. McHenry, a Justice Department agent who was present at Fletcher's arrest, the labor organizer said, "I have been a member of the IWW for seven years, and I have been an organizer of the IWW since a year ago last October."[49] Newspaper accounts, however, indicated that Fletcher was an IWW organizer prior to 1916.

The largest mass trial in American history began on 15 April 1918 and was to last for four months. The leading prosecutor was Frank K. Nebeker, a former counsel for the Utah Copper Company. The defense lawyers included George F. Vandeveer and Otto Christensen. Although Big Bill Haywood was the main attraction, it was a trial of an organization and not of individuals.

In Fletcher's case it was clear that the government was apprehending all Wobblies with leadership qualities irrespective of their alleged guilt. Vandeveer attempted on 20 June to have the charges against Fletcher dismissed. As he stated it, "what has Ben Fletcher ever been shown to have done except that he got married and wrote in for his week's wages?" The counsel was referring to Ben's wedding when he informed Haywood by letter that he had taken a one day honeymoon and was returning a day's pay because he had received a full week's salary.[50]

Fletcher managed to have bail during most of the trial but "[w]hen [he] offended the good temper of" the court, once by oversleeping and once by overeating," Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis got

[48] *Bath and Dies*, box 88–92, IWW Collection, Wayne State; *New York Times*, 17 September 1917.

[49] U.S. vs. Haywood, et al., Box 201-A, pp. 864, 866, IWW Dailies, etc., Wayne State; *New York Times*, 16 August 1918; Ben Fletcher, "Application for Executive Clemency," Pardon Attorney File No. 37-379, Record Group 204, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter as P.A.F. No. 37-379).

[50] Vandeveer's quote is found in U.S. vs. Haywood, et al., Box 1-9-9, "Defendant's Brief of Evidence," IWW Collection, Wayne State; *New York Call* (Magazine section) 5 September 1920, p. 7; Harrison George, *The IWW Trials: Story of the Greatest Trial in Labor History As one of the Defendants* (Chicago, Industrial Workers of the World, 1918?), pp. 38–39.

angry that Fletcher's sickness from overeating forced the court to cancel the 10 July session. He revoked Fletcher's bail and Ben had to spend two weeks in Cook County jail.[6]

Fletcher did not testify on his own behalf, nor were any questions asked of him by the prosecution. Seventy-five of his letters were read at the trial with only a few being printed as part of the official transcript. In 1923 the prosecution's evidence, including Fletcher's letters, were destroyed by the United States Government. Vanderveer protested vehemently that all of the government's evidence referred to letters, newspaper articles, union bulletins, and the like that pertained to events prior to America's declaration of war on 6 April 1917 and thus was inadmissible as evidence. To the Wobblies and Vanderveer the government was trying to prove that anti-capitalism meant the same as pro-Germanism and thus disloyalty to the United States.[7]

Even though Fletcher did not testify, Walter T. Nef, John J. Walsh, and Edward F. Doree, fellow workers from Philadelphia, provided the court with information about the marine transport workers. All three testified that the Wobblies controlled the Philadelphia docks and while about eighty percent of their cargo amounted to powder, munitions, steel rails and other war materials, no explosions or accidents occurred. Walsh indicated that only two or three detectives watched the docks in Philadelphia and they were looking for German not IWW saboteurs. In New York, which was not under Wobbly control, there were as many detectives as there were longshoremen. If the IWW had wanted to undermine the war effort sabotage would not have been a problem. Walsh stated, "There is not a ship on the Atlantic Coast that hasn't got IWW men in the fire room or on deck or in the galley as a cook even."[8]

The defendants were charged with counselling Wobblies to disobey the Selective Service Act. As an organizer Walsh commented that he would have been among the first to know if the IWW wanted its members to refrain from registering. He told the court, "I knew there was over two hundred members [from Philadelphia] volunteered and was drafted before I surrendered myself on December 5, 1917."[9]

6. New York Call, 5 September 1917, p. 3.

7. Grover, *The IWW Trials*, p. 62.

8. U.S. vs. Haywood, et al., p. 3993, Box 1104, pp. 3969, 3984, Box 1104, IWW Collection, Wayne State.

9. Ibid., pp. 3958, 3964, 3980, Box 1104, pp. 131-32, Box 1105, IWW Collection, Wayne State.

For next four months the United States sought to prove that the IWW were disloyal, pro-German, and a menace to American society. After receiving their instructions from Judge Landis, the jury debated and to the surprise of the defendants found them guilty after only fifty minutes of deliberation. Prior to being sentenced Fletcher told the court, "I have not engaged in any disloyal propaganda against the United States Government . . . My activities . . . have always been within the law. . . ." Referring to his voluminous correspondence introduced into the trial, Fletcher remarked, "I do not think you will find a solitilla bit of evidence therein to substantiate any claims that our efforts were disloyal."[24] Despite the seriousness of the day Fletcher managed to keep his humor. When Judge Landis began to give out harsh sentences the black organizer commented to Haywood, "Judge Landis is using poor English today. His sentences are too long."[25]

Although no witnesses testified to Fletcher's disloyalty during the trial, he was convicted on four counts and received a $30,000 fine and a ten year sentence. On 5 October 1920 the Court of Appeals ruled that Fletcher had not violated the Espionage Act and lowered his fine to $20,000. On 11 April 1921 the Supreme Court declined to review the Haywood trial. Fletcher started his term on 7 September 1918 and was out on bail from 7 February 1920 to 25 April 1921.[26]

Throughout the lengthy trial the Wobblies were depicted by the prosecution as unscrupulous individuals bent on seeing the United States destroyed by class warfare. Yet not a single one fled the country or went underground between the time of conviction and sentencing. Richard Brazier, a defendant, recalled in 1966 that Landis' "generosity" in letting them out of Cook County jail prior to sentencing was suspect. They believed that the judge wanted them to run away so that he could label them cowards and fugitives.[27]

After being sentenced, the prisoners were sent by train to the federal penitentiary at Leavenworth. Fletcher, who remarked during the trial to Haywood that "if it wasn't for me, there'd be no raise

25 Landis, Box 118, 6, p. 25.

26 *The Haywood Book: The Autobiography of William D. Haywood* (New York: International Publishers, 1929), p. 321; *New York Times*, 21 August 1918, p. 7.

27 P.A.F. No. 37 178; *New York Times*, 31 August 1918, p. 7. Fletcher testified Hoofing in 1922 that he was unable to pay any part of the $20,000 fine.

28 Richard Brazier, "The Mass IWW Trial of 1918: A Reappraisal," *Labor History* 7 (Spring 1966): 102–112.

in this trial as a.D.' decided during the long train ride to conduct a mock court. The black organizer played the role of Judge Landis. As Haywood recalled,

> he [Fletcher] sat on the back of the seat looking solemn and spitting tobacco juice up the aisle. He had taken off his shoes, collar and tie, and his coat and vest as far as he could get them off. He grabbed at his pants to keep them from falling down as the judge had done one day in court. Fletcher gave a good imitation of the judge's antics. He swore in the prisoners as a jury; calling the guards and detectives up to him. He sentenced them without further ado to be hanged and shot and imprisoned for life.[28]

Fletcher's antics showed in harsh reality that the Wobblies believed that both Judge Landis and the jury had mistreated them. During the trial John J. Walsh predicted how they would be treated when he said, "I know it is a very easy matter any time for a long distance patriot like [Frank K.] Nebeker or [Claude R. Porter . . . to get up here and wave the flag in front of a jury. That is the whole trouble."[29]

The General Defense Committee of the IWW raised funds to take care of the inmates' families. Fletcher's wife was awarded ten dollars weekly to provide for their young son.[30] Fletcher was out of prison on bail for nearly fifteen months yet he did not attempt to flee the country or to go underground. His return to Leavenworth obviously placed a strain on him and his family; therefore his compliance with the law revealed much about his personal integrity. It is not known what effect, if any, prison life had on his mind or body.

A glimpse of his prison life is revealed by a 1921 letter from Fletcher to Mary A. Gallagher of the General Defense Committee. "At present, he wrote, "I am working here as an orderly, in my cell house. . . . I [also] have the added duties of reading . . . in the school here that is in operation from October to April." Fletcher was the first one out of the cell block and the last one locked up. His orderly duties allowed him freedom of movement which permitted him to act as the cell block messenger. Prisoners were allowed up to two hours of recreation daily but prison life was not always tranquil. A smuggled letter from Caesar Tubet to Gallagher indicated that

28. *Bill Haywood's Book*, pp. 325, 326.

29. U.S. vs. Haywood, et. al., p. 135, Box 118 & 2WW Collection, Wayne State.

30. Box 120-7 [Person Relief 1918], IWW Collection, Wayne State.

prison life was harsh for dissenters. Tobet was a tuberculous patient who had been threatened with "permanent isolation for the charge of stirring up strife in the annex over the food" which he described as tasting better raw than cooked.[32]

The Wobblies were sent to prisons because of their distaste for capitalism and because of a bad press. When World War I ended, responsible persons and groups began to agitate for pardons for all political prisoners. In 1919, in addition to the IWW's General Defense Committee's efforts, Fletcher received support for amnesty from A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, editors of *The Messenger* which then referred to itself as "the most radical Negro magazine in America." In August 1919, *The Messenger* informed its readers that "he [Fletcher] has a vision far beyond that of almost any Negro leader whom we know. Ben Fletcher is in Leavenworth for principle a principle which when adopted, will put all the Negro leaders out of their parasitical jobs. That principle is that to the workers belong the world." A 1921 *Messenger* editorial, "Ben Fletcher, Class and Political Amnesty," called for black clergymen and editors to write to the president, Attorney General Henry M. Daugherty and their congressmen demanding the release of Fletcher and other political prisoners. Throughout 1921 and 1922 other issues of the journal demanded political amnesty for all political and class-war prisoners.[33]

After the Court of Appeals had dismissed the espionage charges against the Chicago defendants it became clear that the Wobblies were guilty of nothing more than the inability to say nice things about capitalism. Yet, their anti-capitalist views gave many the impression that they deserved their fate. No less a person than Attorney General Daugherty stated in 1922 that "in a great industrial nation such as ours, labor organizations are necessary, but *they must be the right kind of unions under the right kind of leadership.*[34] (Italics added.)

The New York Times editorially considered the IWW to be a menace. In 1921 the *Times* asked, "Has the time come to forget the

32. Ben Fletcher to Mary L. Gallagher, 29 September 1927. Caesar Tobet to Gallagher, manuscript correspondence, vertical file, Labadie Collection of Labor History, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Cited hereafter as vertical file, Ann Arbor.

33. *The Messenger* 11 (August 1918): 28-29; "Ben Fletcher, Class and Political Amnesty," Ibid., 3 (July 1921): 3; 4 (January 1922): 8; 4 (March 1922): 367-4 (February 1922): 399, 401-4 (April 1922): 388-389.

34. *Address by the Attorney General of the United States Hon. Henry M. Daugherty at Canton, Ohio, October 21, 1922*, n.p., p. 8. New York Public Library.

war?" The retort was yes to millions of Americans who viewed the imprisonment of the Wobblies as an infringement upon the right of free speech. Throughout 1921 and 1922 laymen, college professors, congressmen, writers, and others began to sign petitions calling for the release of political prisoners. Four World War I Medal of Honor winners favored amnesty.[34] Prominent Americans such as Oswald Garrison Villard, Samuel Gompers, Meyer London, Morris Hillquit, Norman Thomas, Booth Tarkington, Helen Keller, and Senators Robert La Follette and William Borah requested amnesty. In 1922 fifty congressmen asked President Harding to grant freedom to the jailed Wobblies. The United States Senate's resolution calling for Daugherty to release all information relating to political prisoners was rejected by the Attorney General.[35] President Harding declined to issue a blanket pardon, but stated that all the cases would have to be judged independently.[36]

Personal letters and petitions were sent to the Justice Department on behalf of Fletcher in December 1921 and throughout most of 1922. Fletcher's pardon file contains fourteen letters from private individuals asking executive clemency for the Philadelphian. Twelve of the letters were sent from Philadelphia with one each postmarked New York and Connecticut. His pardon file contains several petitions signed by housewives, lawyers, laborers, merchants, clergymen, and a college professor. Dr. Comfort, President of Haverford College and the daughter of the former Pennsylvania governor, Samuel Pennypacker, signed a petition.[37]

The majority of the personal letters addressed to the president emphasized Fletcher's fine character and requested that Harding release Fletcher in time for Christmas, 1921. Elizabeth Kleinman described the IWW organizer as "a friend . . . so sympathetic and human that I cannot conceive him capable of any criminal act or an act of violence." Other letters described Fletcher as "a loyal citizen . . . [who] has never done anything that would injure his country in any way," or as "a man of unquestionable character . . . splendid in his honesty."[38]

34. *New York Times*, 1 April 1921, p. 12; 15 November 1921, p. 4.

35. *Ibid.*, 5 April 1922, p. 21; 15 June 1922, p. 17; 19 November 1921, p. 2; 22 March 1922, p. 18; 2 October 1922, p. 10; *Congressional Record—House*, 67th Congress, 2nd session (Washington, 1922), p. 1071. For Daugherty's reply see Doc. No. 150 in source volume, p. 7.

37. *New York Times*, 21 December 1921, p. 3; 20 July 1922, p. 6.

38. P.A.F. No. 37 479.

39. Elizabeth Kleinman to Harding, 19 December 1921; Charles Carter to Harding, 29 December 1921; Mrs. Harry A. Patterson to Harding, 27 December 1921. Ibid.

According to C. S. Golden, business representative of the International Association of Machinists, District Lodge No. 1 in Philadelphia, Fletcher was not only a loyal dockworker but also a man who was actively connected with various reform activities, and one who was "interested in promoting human progress and happiness."[39]

In 1922 longshoremen and others familiar with the Philadelphia docks wrote to Harding about Fletcher's loyalty. Peter Curtin, foreman for Murphy, Cook and Company, the largest stevedore firm in the city commented:

> I knew Benjamin Fletcher first about three years ago when I saw him at the meetings of the longshoremen. He always counselled the men to be tolerant and to work for their ends by peaceful means and not to gain everything at once. As a foreman . . . I trusted [the M.T.W.U.] completely. They had a service flag at their headquarters and I never heard of their dodging the draft or even talking against it. They worked for sixty (60) cents an hour during the war and that was less than any other men.[40]

In March 1922 the House Judiciary Committee held a public hearing on the subject of amnesty for political prisoners. Among the speakers supporting the measure were New York congressmen Meyer London and W. Bourke Cockran; Albert de Silva, New York Associate Director of the ACLU and Dr. Frederick Edgerton of the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Edgerton spoke on behalf of Fletcher, Nef, Doree, and Walsh. He reiterated that the IWW had controlled the docks without committing sabotage, and that the men had purchased approximately $15,000 worth of liberty bonds. Dr. Edgerton mentioned that about 700 members of the MTWU had served in the army with about 500 hundred of them seeing action in France. Altogether about 2500 members of the IWW marine transport workers union in Philadelphia, 1000 members of the New York Civic Club and the Philadelphia Civil Liberties Union presented statements for amnesty before the House Judiciary Committee.[41]

39. C. S. Golden to Harding, 27 December 1921. Ibid.

40. Affidavit of Peter Curtin, 1 February 1922. Ibid.

41. *Amnesty for Political Prisoners. Hearing Before the Committee on the Judiciary*, House of Representatives, 67 congress, 2nd session. (Washington, 1922), pp. 2, 3, 20, 36, 37, 48, 50, 70–79, 82.

The sincerity of the personal letters to Harding and the impact of public opinion in favor of amnesty caused the government to open the cases of the Philadelphia four. In early December of 1921, prior to receipt of the letters, telegrams, and petitions supporting Fletcher's release, the Justice Department advised against amnesty for him. The Justice Department ruled that Fletcher

> was a Negro who had great influence with the colored stevedores, dock workers, firemen, and sailors, and materially assisted in building up the Marine Transport Workers Union which at time of indictment had become so strong that it practically controlled all shipping on the Atlantic Coast.[43]

On April 8, 1922, Pardon Attorney James A. Finch sent a memorandum to a Mr. Burns, chief of the Bureau of Investigation, instructing him to investigate the cases of the Philadelphia four. Finch wrote, "We are having considerable difficulty in ascertaining just what these Philadelphia defendants did that constituted the offense of which they were convicted . . ."[44] In late April additional information arrived at the Justice Department making it clear that Fletcher and his friends were probably innocent. Ben's waterfront colleague Emil John Lever viewed Fletcher's character as "absolutely free of prejudice, malice or hatred. . . ." Lever reported that it was Fletcher who had organized a mass meeting in 1917 so that Major Freely of the Schuylkill Arsenal could address the longshoremen about cooperation, in order to make the war effort successful. "In that respect," Lever wrote, "his high standing with his race, who feared about sixty percent of the port workers, was invaluable."[45]

The wheels of justice were advancing slowly but progress was being made. In May 1922 Frances F. Kane, who served from 24 September 1913 to 4 March 1920 as a United States attorney for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, stated that the IWW did not engage in sabotage. Kane reported that he was never asked during or after the trial about the war record of the four men. "If due consideration had been given to it," Kane wrote, "they would not have been convicted in the trial at Chicago." He requested that some

43 Memorandum, Political Records, Political Prisoners, Dept. of Justice Files, 30 December 1921, NAWDC, National Archives, Washington, D.C., as quoted in Philip S. Foner, "The IWW and the Black Worker," *Journal of Negro History*, 55 (January 1970), 50.

44 James A. Finch to Mr. Burns, Chief, Bureau of Investigation, 8 April 1922, P.A.F. No. 37-670.

45 Affidavit of Emil John Lever, 28 April 1922, Ibid.

the men were not guilty of war crimes they should be granted executive clemency. A similar view was presented by Todd Daniel who was in charge of the Justice Department's Philadelphia division during the war years.[45]

On 18 June 1922 Finch informed Warden W. I. Biddle of Leavenworth that the Justice Department was considering recommending executive clemency for Fletcher, Nef, Doree, and Walsh. Finch wrote to Biddle that the four were supposed to have been involved in carrying out a general strike on 5 September 1917, the day that the IWW offices were raided. The Pardon Attorney advised the warden to tell the four men to send in applications for executive clemency since "it seems to be undoubtedly true that there is little, if anything, to criticize concerning the conduct and service rendered by the unions they represented during the war period."[46]

In their applications for clemency the men stated that they were unaware of a general strike proposal and would not have supported one if ordered to do so by the IWW's Chicago headquarters. Doree wrote that none were officially connected with the IWW at the time of the raid. Fletcher was in Boston "working in the building trades" while Walsh and Nef were working as a laborer and longshoreman respectively. Doree stated that he "was acting as temporary secretary-treasurer of the Textile Workers Industrial Union. . . ." Walsh wrote that he was charged with accepting German gold and "now five years later thanks to your letter I know what I am charged with." Walsh was not an educated man but his closing sentence was articulate: "Well seeing that there is nothing against us I think that it is up to you to release us."[47]

After examining the various affidavits and personal applications for executive clemency, the government began the process of releasing the four men. On 10 August 1922 two significant memorandums were written. One from agent Herrin, a Justice Department investigator, to Assistant Attorney General Crim reported that the four Wobblies were not "guilty of the offense with which they were charged." The Marine Transport Workers Industrial Union had

46 Affidavits of Frances S. Katz and Todd Daniel, 8 May 1922, Ibid.

47 Pardon Attorney Hunter A. Perkins to Warden W. I. Biddle, Leavenworth Prison, 19 June 1922, Ibid.

48 Walter L. Nef and Edward F. Doree to James A. Finch, 11 June 1922, Ibid.; H. Fletcher to James A. Finch, 12 June 1922, John J. Walsh to James A. Finch, 17 June 1922, Ibid.

bought war bonds and the "list of bond buyers was hung conspicuously in the union hall." Investigator Herron's recommendation that "their sentences be commuted to the terms already served" met with Crim's approval and he advised Attorney General Daugherty by a memorandum.[48]

Edward F. Dorr's sentence was commuted in early September due to the illness of his five-year-old son. In October Harding announced that the other three would be released on the condition that they would stay out of trouble. Harding's unwillingness to give them a complete pardon irritated many. Mary G. Fendall, Executive Secretary of the Joint Amnesty Committee, protested the conditional commutation of the sentences. She feared that the terms of the pardon would result in the men being "shadowed by detectives" and possibly would "be returned to prison without being given a hearing for acts [for] which they could certainly not be convicted."[49]

A similar protest was registered by Allen S. Olmsted who was acting as the men's lawyer. Daugherty wrote to him noting that the commutation was conditional not because "the president . . . believed [them] to be innocent . . . but [because] . . . he believed that they should be released provided proper precaution could be taken to assure their being law abiding in the future." On 25 October Senator George W. Pepper of Pennsylvania informed Pardon Attorney Finch that Harding should "make a clean sweep of it. [the pardon] instead of imposing terms which cannot in any effective way operate to the advantages of government."[50]

Harding refused to alter the commutation terms. He could not reject them since they were American citizens so perhaps he was trying to curtail their future union activity by giving them a conditional pardon. Fletcher and the others were not permitted to "leave Leavenworth until they signed a receipt for the warrant commuting their sentences. Fletcher signed his on 30 October 1922.

Shortly before Christmas 1933, President Roosevelt issued full pardons to 150 political prisoners. No names were released by the

48 Memorandum for Mr. Herron. Investigatory to Assistant Attorney General Crim and memorandum from Crim to Attorney General Daugherty, 30 August 1922, ibid.

49. *New York Times*, 9 September 1922, p. 15; Mary G. Fendall, to Harding, 7 October 1922, F.A.P. No. 67-28.

50. Allen S. Olmsted to Daugherty, 28 October 1922, Daugherty to Allen S. Olmsted, 28 October 1922, Senator George W. Pepper to James A. Finch, 25 October 1922, F.A.P. No. 67-28.

White House. This caused some confusion and in early 1934 two New York attorneys, Gazan and Caldwell, inquired of United States Attorney Dwight H. Green if Fletcher had "been pardoned within the terms of [Roosevelt's] proclamation. . . ." Green forwarded the question to the Bureau of Prisons in Washington which replied on 12 March that Fletcher's pardon was included in the president's proclamation.[8]

Upon being released from Leavenworth, Fletcher returned to Philadelphia where the marine transport workers were involved in a strike for a forty-four-hour work week. Attempts were made by unknown individuals to get blacks to return to their jobs as scabs on the grounds that whites would receive preferential treatment. That was not the first time that the race issue was brought in as an attempt to create a wedge between workers in Philadelphia. In August 1920 the union warned its members in a bulletin, "Beware of Union Disrupters," that cowards and imposters were trying to get the black dock workers to form their own union because allegedly whites were going to take their jobs. True to its principles, the IWW called upon "white men, colored men, native born, foreign born, [to] STAND TOGETHER."[9]

Between 1920 and early spring 1923, the MTWIU No. 8 faced serious challenges to its existence from both the International Longshoremen Association and the communist controlled General Executive Board of the IWW's Chicago headquarters. Between 7 February 1920 and 24 April 1921, Fletcher was out of Leavenworth on bail. During that period he became involved in what has been called the "Philadelphia Controversy." In 1920 Fletcher was elected secretary-treasurer of Local No. 8. The Chicago office refused to recognize this victory because the Philadelphia local was charging twenty-five dollars initiation fees in violation of the IWW constitution which limited fees to two dollars. Local No. 8 argued that high fees were needed "to control the unorganized portions of the industry" and to prevent it from dragging the organized element down. The Chicago office argued that the local was practicing a closed shop and was "not tak[ing] any interest in the growth or education of the membership—no literature, no leaflets, no organizers, nothing, nothing at all." Despite depositions from Fletcher and

8. New York *Times*, 20 December 1933, p. 7. Dwight H. Green to Bureau of Prisons, 2 January 1934. Robert H. Parker to Dwight H. Green, 12 March 1934. RG 129 Vol. 32-439.

9. *Industrial Solidarity*, 4 November 1920, p. 1. "The Philadelphia Controversy," Box 75-79, appendix 2, p. 16. IWW Collection, Wayne State

others to the contrary, Local No. 8 was charged with loading munitions in 1919 that were used to defeat the Russian working class. Between 4 December 1920 and November 1921 Local No. 8 was suspended from the IWW.[5]

There are different versions explaining the demise of Local No. 8. In 1923 Fletcher wrote in *The Messenger* that the local was a victim of "unreasonable and inefficient centralism that has grown upon the IWW since 1916." The Chicago office wanted the local to remit to headquarters "all but income balances above $100 and to confine all expenditures to those 'permitted.'" The workers refused and in April 1923 formed the Philadelphia Longshoremen's Union as an independent union. In 1936 Walter T. Nef wrote to the curator of the Labadie Collection of labor history at Ann Arbor that Local No. 8 was destroyed by the Chicago office which viewed the MTWIU as a conservative union interested only in job security. Spero and Harris viewed the Philadelphia longshoremen as not committed to revolutionary syndicalism. They were successful because of their ability to wage job control, and its relationship with employers differed "not one whit from a conservative union of the AFL." Emil John Lever reflected in 1968 that Fletcher and the local were ousted because they signed formal contracts which Chicago viewed as "subvert[ing] the IWW's revolutionary spirit."[6] Dubofsky reported that Fletcher led the local out of the IWW and into the AFL in 1921. That statement appears to be in error for his sources do not make that point.[7] As early as 1913 Fletcher is forced to Gompers' union as "labor fakirs" and in July 1923 he described the AFL as a racist organization that was "for the most part . . . indifferent and in opposition to the fate of Negro labor."[8]

5. [The Industrial Commonwealth . . . for U.S. Recruiting Mission of the 4th Colonial Corporation of the Salvation Army of the World war in France American Red Cross in Navana, 23 December 1921, Chicago: printed by the Printing and Publishing Workers Industrial Union No. 450 AWIU, 1919], p. 48.

6. Ben Fletcher, "Philadelphia's Note from Unionism," *The Messenger*, 5 (June 1923): 740; Oral History (Jack Leger), p. 12, IWW Collection, Wayne State; Walter T. Nef to Agnes Inglis, Vertical File, Ann Arbor; Spero and Harris, *The Black Worker*, pp. 335, 373.

7. Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the International Workers of the World, Industrial Pioneers Books, 1969*), p. 448. Dubofsky cited *Proceedings of the 1921 IWW Convention* which could not have mentioned Fletcher's behavior three years later. And Joseph Gaer, *Profiles of the AFL* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), pp. 135–137 as well as Pat Renshaw, *The Wobblies: The Story of Syndicalism in the United States* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), p. 162. Neither author mentions that Fletcher left the AFL/WIU and the IWW.

8. Ben Fletcher, "The Negro and Organized Labor," *The Messenger*, 5 (June 1923): 740–741; Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker*, p. 101.

After the demise of the MTWIU in 1923, little is known about Ben Fletcher or what his role was in the Philadelphia Longshoremen Union. He did keep his membership in the IWW active until his death in 1949. His loyalty was more than sentimental because his letters continued to be signed "Yours for O.B.U." (One Big Union). Fletcher was still speaking for the IWW during the Great Depression. In 1931 E. S. Marlin, an AFL official reported to *Industrial Solidarity* that he heard Fletcher hold an audience spellbound for an hour in New York City. Marlin viewed Fletcher in this perspective:

> I have heard all the big shots of the labor movement over a period of 25 years from coast to coast and it is no exaggeration when I state that this colored man . . . is the only one I ever heard who cut right through to the bone of capitalist pretensions to being an everlasting ruling class, with a concrete constructive working class union argument.[6]

Fletcher's speaking ability and union devotion was hampered by a stroke on 21 January 1938 and later by a heart attack in 1945.[7] In 1931 Fletcher wrote to an A. Clark in Newark about addressing an IWW meeting but it is not known if he spoke. By 1942 the IWW had long ceased to be a viable union yet Fletcher viewed it as a vital organization that had "carried the ball further than any other labor movement and our[that . . . will be in there carrying the ball right over the goal line."[8]

After suffering a heart attack in 1945, Fletcher's mobility was seriously affected. On 10 July 1949 he died at his home in Brooklyn. *The New York Times* and the black Philadelphia *Tribune* reported his death with an obituary while the *New York Amsterdam News* and the prestigious *Journal of Negro History*, which published obituaries from 1926 to 1958, ignored his passing. Fletcher's death notice, however, received wide coverage in *Industrial Worker*. Over 150 Wobblies and their families attended his funeral where many eulogies were spoken on behalf of his memory. Sam Weiner said, "Ben, we won't forget the great part you played in the struggle to emancipate the workers and we will carry on inspired by your example." Herbert Mahler read a tribute which told Ben to rest while "we will struggle on to gain the victory."[9]

6. *Industrial Solidarity*, 11 August 1931, p. 4.

7. Fletcher to Agnes Inglis, 21 May 1942, 30 November 1945, Wells Collection, Ann Arbor.

8. Fletcher to A. Clark, 29 May 1931, IWW Collection, Wayne State, Box 20, 21. Fletcher to Agnes Inglis, 25 July 1947, Wells of the Ann Arbor.

9. *New York Times*, 12 July 1949, p. 27; Philadelphia *Tribune*, 19 July 1949, p. 2; *Industrial Worker*, 27 July 1949, p. 4.

In December 1949 George Carey wrote to Walter Nef that the IWW had lost two great warriors during the year with the deaths of Justus Ebert and Ben Fletcher. The praise for Fletcher was by no means a shallow display of grief for a fallen comrade because eighteen years after his death Fletcher's organizing ability was remembered and cherished. In 1967 Richard Brazier who was convicted in the Haywood trial wrote to John N. Beffel:

> It is too bad that the Wobblies have not a dozen Negro organizers [like Fletcher] trying to organize the millions of Negro unorganized workers. . . . What would it matter if the present I.W.W. became predominantly Negro just so long as they followed the principles, tactics and tenents [sic] of the organization. Yes, it would create a great furore [sic] but with the growth of the rebellious spirit [urban riots] now rampant it would—and could—defy another effort of the Government to suppress the Wobblies again.[84]

In 1972 a small spark was ignited in Long Beach, California when twenty-five plastic workers struck for higher wages, better working conditions, and union recognition under the banner of the Industrial Workers of the World.[85] For various social and economic reasons the IWW will probably never be resurrected into the militant labor organization that it was before 1918. Today it is an almost forgotten organization save for a few old men with their faded newspaper clippings and memories dulled by the cobwebs of time. Benjamin Harrison Fletcher was a man who did not achieve the popular fame of a Bill Haywood or an A. Philip Randolph. However, his contribution to both labor and black history was important and for that he should be remembered.[86]

84. George Carey to Walter T. Nef, 9 December 1949, Vertical file, Ann Arbor; Dick Brazier to John N. Beffell, 13 December 1967 in the John N. Beffell Papers, Tamiment Collection, New York University.

85. Larry Brack, "California: *Hollywood Press-Telegram*, 7 May 1972.

86. Efforts to open Ben Fletcher's will, finalize and locate his burial lot in the late 1960s. See correspondence on Ben Fletcher in the John Beffell Papers, New York University.

Document Outline

- Article Contents
  - p. [212]
  - p. 213
  - p. 214
  - p. 215
  - p. 216
  - p. 217
  - p. 218
  - p. 219
  - p. 220
  - p. 221
  - p. 222
  - p. 223
  - p. 224
  - p. 225
  - p. 226
  - p. 227
  - p. 228
  - p. 229
  - p. 230
  - p. 231
  - p. 232
- Issue Table of Contents
  - Pennsylvania History, Vol. 46, No. 3 (July, 1979), pp. 195-287
    - Front Matter
    - THE DEVELOPMENT OF ELECTRIC TRACTION ON THE PENNSYLVANIA RAILROAD, 1895-1968 [pp. 195-211]
    - BEN FLETCHER, I.W.W. ORGANIZER [pp. 212-232]
    - CONTINUITY OF THE ENGLISH TAX EXPERIENCE IN EARLY PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY [pp. 233-244]
    - BETWEEN PIETY AND EXPERTISE: PROFESSIONALIZATION OF COLLEGE FACULTY IN THE "AGE OF THE UNIVERSITY" [pp. 245-266]
    - BOOK REVIEWS

- Review: untitled [pp. 267-268]
- Review: untitled [pp. 268-269]
- Review: untitled [pp. 269-271]
- Review: untitled [pp. 271-272]
- Review: untitled [pp. 272-273]
- Review: untitled [pp. 273-275]
- Review: untitled [pp. 275-276]
- Review: untitled [pp. 276-277]
- Review: untitled [pp. 277-279]
- Review: untitled [pp. 279-280]
- Review: untitled [pp. 280-281]
- Review: untitled [pp. 281-282]
- Review: untitled [pp. 282-284]
- Review: untitled [pp. 284-286]
- Review: untitled [pp. 286-287]

- Back Matter